

## Images of Rural Life: Photographs of Verne Morton

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providing products for home consumption. Jones largely ignores these activities. Likewise, he slights that portion of rural life which was unrelated to economic activity. Rural family life, institutions, recreation, ethnicity, and interpersonal relations are among the topics mentioned only in passing, if at all. When Jones does touch on social history, such as when he writes about farm women, his treatment is limp and impressionistic, and he seems to be fulfilling an obligation rather than advancing deeper understanding.

One is reluctant to criticize an author for failing to do what he did not intend to do, and Jones does an excellent job in his areas of expertise. Readers should know, however, that this is mainly an economic history of commercial agriculture in early Ohio, and it does not go far beyond that. As such, *History of Agriculture in Ohio to 1880* will be of value to agricultural historians and of interest to farming buffs, but will have little appeal to a broader audience.

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*Images of Rural Life: Photographs of Verne Morton*, by the DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984. 225 pp. Photographs. \$32.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

By finding, soliciting, and securing the life's work of photographer Verne Morton, the DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, New York, greatly enriched its own collection. By finding the funds to publish this nicely presented catalog of the Morton collection, it has shared the wealth. Verne Morton was a semiprofessional photographer who lived in Groton, New York, and created a collection of 12,000 images between 1896 and 1945. After teaching school for some time, he apparently left that vocation to pursue photography full-time, even though he could not support himself through photography alone. As a bachelor living with a bachelor brother, he had little motivation to turn his camera toward scenes of domestic life. Instead he turned outward, in spite of his reportedly shy nature, and photographed rural scenes in Tompkins County. His most interesting images depict farming the land, and processes like maple sugaring and beekeeping. Occasionally he captured distant rolling hills and other beauties of his environment.

Photographic books which feature single photographers, unless they are fine art photographers, are rare. *The Smith and Telfer Photographic Collection* (1978) by the New York State Historical Association is the most similar to the Morton book, even though Smith and Telfer were commercial photographers and Morton seems to have

been sometimes commercial and sometimes not. Authors have devoted entire books to the work of expeditionary and frontier photographers such as William Henry Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, and F. Jay Haynes, but few if any rural locale photographers have received such exposure. This is a coup for the DeWitt Historical Society, but with it comes the responsibility to publish an excellent prototype. In design and quality of image reproduction they have done so. In textual content they have not.

Fortunately for the viewer who loves to study detail in photos, the society has printed the majority of Morton's 246 images one-to-a-page, usually  $4\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ , close in size to the  $5 \times 7$  glass plate negatives Morton typically used. The photo editors have wisely chosen to publish mainly views from glass negatives, even though 50 percent of the Morton collection is on nitrate negatives. In Morton's work, the images on glass are sharper and more detailed. The editors also decided to feature the period 1901 to 1910 by publishing 148 images from that era. These do appear to be the strongest in composition and content, although some good photos from the other decades are available. However, there are definitely some that the editors could have omitted to make room for one or two good essays.

The lamentable fact about this book is that it has no significant essays. It has a forward by Louis C. Jones, Director Emeritus of the New York State Historical Association, and a preface by Craig S. Williams, Director of the DeWitt Historical Society. They present some interesting information about how the society acquired the collection, but neither puts the collection into a broader intellectual context. A helpful biography of Verne Morton by Ellen Vanas follows, but no one attempts to compare Morton to the dozens of other photographers nationwide who were his peers.

Here is a missed opportunity for an essay on the phenomenon of the home photographer with more than average skills, the ranks of whom burgeoned in the late 1890s and thinned around World War I. Most curators of historical photograph collections will recognize familiar scenes on these pages. An essay could have placed Morton in a context of contemporaries and influences such as photographic literature, camera clubs, world expositions, and popular magazines. Another essay might have compared Morton's work to that of a commercial studio, such as the nearby one of Smith and Telfer.

The foreword calls Morton a "folk photographer," a dubious, debatable, and ill-defined term. Morton is a semiprofessional photographer somewhere in between the snapshot shooter and the sophisticated professional. The Vanas biography makes that clear, but could provide even more information to better define the professional

aspect of his work. For example, she could have included one of his photos as printed in one of the many magazines in which he published, or she could have quoted his correspondence, if available, with picture editors. The captions for some photos could have indicated which magazines published them, whether Morton sold them as postcards, and which ones local families and businesses commissioned. Such clues to the photographer's intent and motivation would aid in understanding and viewing his work.

This book's usefulness lies in its availability for comparison. Curators and collectors can compare Morton to their own local photographers and draw some conclusions from the similarities and differences. If he was painstaking and exacting, were others more informal? Was his "unusual attention to detail" (xi) really so unusual? When did he excel at depicting processes and when was he mediocre? For me, comparing Morton to some Minnesota photographers helps put them in a slightly broader context. I hope the work of more such individuals gets published, but with essays, *please*.

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BONNIE WILSON

*They Came to This Place: A History of Spillville, Iowa and Its Czech Settlers*, by Cyril M. Klimesh. Sebastopol, Ca.: Methodius Press, 1983. viii, 239 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$14.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Historians have extensively chronicled the migration of over forty million immigrants from Europe to America in the century after 1830. Unfortunately, despite this abundance of studies, two important problems still plague immigration scholarship. First, we know much more about some groups than about others. Second, newcomers to urban America have drawn considerably more attention than those who settled in rural regions. Because Cyril M. Klimesh's account of Czechs in Spillville, Iowa, treats a seldom-studied ethnic group and helps to extend the boundaries of historical inquiry into rural America, it is a useful addition to the field of immigrant, ethnic, and even community history. Yet, while Klimesh bases his account on original materials such as local newspapers, ethnic histories, and census manuscripts, he clearly does not attain the standards of modern, historical scholarship. The book's research is spotty and unduly selective, the analysis of the data at hand is weak, and Klimesh makes no attempt to link his findings to the existing knowledge on Czechs and other immigrants. This neglect is unfortunate, for many of the details about these Iowa Czechs need more explanation and background.

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